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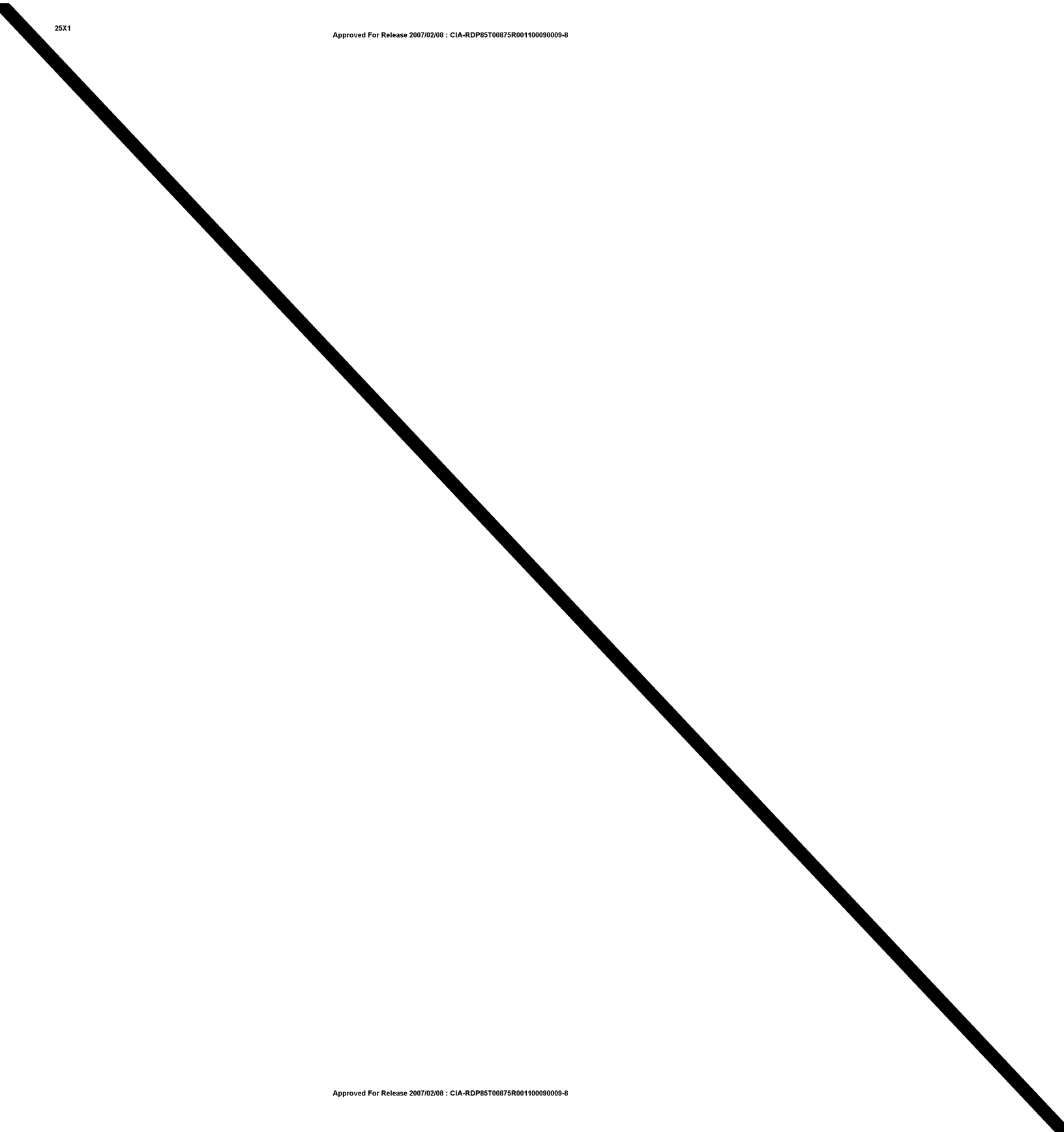

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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Memorandum

IMPLICATIONS FOR CAMBODIA OF THE MOVE AGAINST SIHANOUK

State Dept. review completed

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
19 March 1970

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Implications for Cambodia of the Move Against Sihanouk

Events have moved in Cambodia with uncommon rapidity. The seven-month old effort on the part of Prime Minister Lon Nol and his deputy Sirik Matak slowly to curtail then chief of state Sihanouk's power has suddenly and with little warning blossomed into the first full-blown political crisis in Cambodia in over a decade. For the first time in Sihanouk's 17 years as leader of an independent Cambodia, important elements of the major domestic sources of power within the country, the army, the royal family, the bureaucracy, and possibly even the people, are aligned against him. For the first time, those elements in Phnom Penh who have long chafed under his rule, either because of his authoritarian style of running the country or because of a fundamental disagreement with his economic and foreign policies, have united and found leadership, notably in the forceful and energetic person of Sirik Matak.

The struggle for power in Phnom Penh, which at this moment is clearly running in favor of the anti-Sihanouk forces, involves truly fundamental issues: who will make Cambodian policy and what that policy should be. The two are obviously closely related, and there can be no question that a major struggle has been fought over the efficacy of Sihanouk's policies. The struggle is not simply between these who support Sihanouk's brand of neutralism, his accommodation with the Communists, or his fuzzy-minded economic policies and those who would align Cambodia with the US and South Vietnam or

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who advocate other economic policies. To a large extent, differences over policies have been merely the catalyst in the power struggle now under way in Phnom Penh, but whether the new leadership, should it prevail in its contest with the Prince, will be able to devise a new formula for meeting Cambodia's problems is by no means certain.

This memorandum outlines the events of the week or so preceding Sihanouk's ouster and briefly reviews the major developments in Cambodian national life and foreign relations of the past few years that are relevant to the current situation. The probable reactions of the North and South Vietnamese, as well as the Soviets and the Chinese Communists, are considered. Finally, the paper offers some comments on possible courses of action Sihanouk may take.

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The Current Situation

1. The formal move to depose Sihanouk was made in Phnom Penh on the afternoon of 18 March. At the request of the government, both houses of the Cambodian legislature met in special closed session and voted to withdraw its confidence in Sihanouk as chief of state and, in "conformity with the national constitution," appointed National Assembly President Cheng Heng as acting chief of state pending elections to fill the post permanently. The mechanics through which Lon Nol and Sirik Matak have moved against Sihanouk--a recourse to academic constitutional procedures--is clearly designed to clothe the new arrangement in constitutional legitimacy and make Sihanouk's position that much more untenable. The Prince's only recourse now, assuming the National Assembly sticks to its guns, is to appeal to the Cambodian people in an ad hoc extraconstitutional manner or run once again for his old job, on the outside chance that he is allowed to do so. Never a master of constitutional niceties, Sihanouk now finds that the bogus "constitutional" system he devised has become a telling instrument in the hands of his opponents. The Cambodian communiqué also stated that the vote against Sihanouk in the legislature was unanimous, a good sign of the bandwagon psychology now at play in Phnom Penh.

2. As a security precaution, the government has closed the Phnom Penh airport and suspended external communication facilities. No other unusual security precautions have been noted, but the army has been on alert for the past week. The Phnom Penh police chief has been replaced, apparently as another step in the government's effort to consolidate its control. The situation on the South Vietnamese border, where Vietnamese Communist and Cambodian troops have been squared off against each other since the attacks on the Communist embassies on 11 March, was at last report quiet.

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3. The government thus far has said nothing publicly about Sihanouk's future position--whether he will be allowed to return to Phnom Penh or even whether he has been officially notified of the legislature's action. There is no evidence that sheds any light on its thinking. The chances are pretty good that the leaders in Phnom Penh have not yet thought through this problem. Sihanouk's mother, Queen Kossamak, who has issued several highly unusual messages to the nation in recent days, apparently to protect the position of the throne in the new scheme of things, has been notably silent. She presumably will weigh in against any proposal that would involve Sihanouk's permanent exile. Sihanouk himself has not yet made any comment on events in Phnom Penh. According to press accounts, Soviet Premier Kosygin told Sihanouk about his ouster as the Prince boarded a plane taking him to Peking. Sihanouk's original schedule called for him to return to Phnom Penh on 24 March.

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5. The government's decision to move decisively against Sihanouk at this time represents a radical shift from the slow nibbling away at his power that government leaders had been pursuing for the past six months. With Sihanouk out of the country, and believing they could count on the support of the National Assembly and many, if not all, army

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commanders, Matak and Lon Nol evidently decided that they could afford to buck the Prince on the single most important issue facing the country. They were apparently prepared for a showdown if that was what the Prince wanted. Lon Nol apparently believed that Sihanouk had decided, while he was in Paris, to overthrow the government and replace it with one that was responsive to his direction. The leaders of the anti-Sihanouk forces apparently felt they had to move before Sihanouk had the opportunity to reverse the trend of events.

Background

6. The genesis of the current struggle for power can, of course, be traced back many years. One crucial turning point occurred in late 1963 and early 1964 when Sihanouk, convinced that a relatively early Communist victory in South Vietnam was in the cards, began to make adjustments in Cambodia's foreign policy. This involved abruptly terminating US military and economic assistance. Sihanouk made the decision on his own, with little or no consultation with interested parties in the army and the government. He placated the army by acquiring military assistance from Communist China and the Soviet Union, but many army officers--particularly those who had trained in the US--still yearned for a return to the days when the US played a paramount role. The politics of these officers, and Lon Nol was counted among them, were also out of tune with Sihanouk's blatantly pro-Communist neutralism. Other members of the Phnom Penh elite, including members of the bureaucracy and the royal family, were even more upset over the course of Sihanouk's policy. With a strong economic stake in a continuing US presence in the country, and by ideology and heritage strongly anti-Communist, these elements made it clear [redacted] 25X1 that they were opposed to Sihanouk.

7. [redacted] 25X1

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25X1 [redacted] In order to gird the nation for what he knew would be a perilous period and to help compensate for the loss of US economic assistance, Sihanouk also instituted a number of ill-conceived economic "reforms" that involved banking and the rice trade. These did little to ingratiate him with the Phnom Penh elite and when the economy ran into bad trouble in the coming years, Sihanouk got much of the blame.

8. The fissure between Sihanouk and his base of power in the army and among the Phnom Penh elite was a consequence, then, of two interrelated factors: a difference of opinion about what was in Cambodia's best interests, and considerable resentment about the authoritarian and highly personalized way Sihanouk ran things. That Sihanouk managed for at least five years to keep growing disgruntlement from becoming a threat to his own position, while at the same time doing pretty much what he pleased, is testimony to his skill, hard work, magnetic personality, and the unique place he has occupied in Cambodian affairs. It is hard to say how long Sihanouk might have kept the show going if events had not began to run too strongly against him. One of the most important factors is the sheer physical strain that the effort required. This not only meant that Sihanouk was forced to take a vacation in France when he faced a major challenge to his authority--a clear tactical mistake that may prove to be Sihanouk's worst--but that he was also forced to turn to energetic opposition elements to help run the government.

9. When Sihanouk turned to Sirik Matak and Lon Nol to form a new government last summer, he was fully aware that they would try to run their government with a minimum of interference. Matak was not an unknown quantity; his opposition to Sihanouk's past policies was well known, his independence of thought and action had been demonstrated over the years. Sihanouk wanted Lon Nol and Matak to take up some of the burdens of running the government, but the process of passing some authority to others proved to be exceedingly painful. It was not made any better by the relish with

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which Matak pressed forward and began carefully but unremittingly to curtail Sihanouk's powers. The fight was not essentially about issues; Sihanouk had approved the government's economic reforms and many of the tough policies against the Vietnamese Communists he had himself been putting into effect for at least two years.

The Vietnamese Communist Issue

10. Nevertheless, the question of the growing Vietnamese Communist presence on Cambodian soil became an important aspect of the struggle in Phnom Penh. For one thing, it threw into question the viability of Sihanouk's foreign policy. Although it was true that the Prince had kept the war for the most part out of Cambodia--no mean achievement, but bound to be given short shrift by elements out to get Sihanouk's scalp--the country faced just as grave a threat from the about 40,000 Vietnamese who were ensconcing themselves in Cambodia for the duration of the war. The Communists had pledged to remove their forces once the war was over, but who could tell when that would be? Through all of his skillful maneuvering--military pressures on the border, holding up rice and arms shipments, talks with the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese, signed documents pledging Communist respect for Cambodia's borders--the fact remained that the Vietnamese were still in Cambodia and had no intention of moving. For Sihanouk, this unhappy state of affairs was a sad consequence of Cambodia's weakness and its desire not to become a party to the US and South Vietnamese war effort. As long as he believed that the Vietnamese Communists would prevail--and his message to the Queen on 17 March indicates that his assessment has not changed--he felt Cambodia had little choice but to make the best of an inherently bad situation.

11. It seems reasonably clear from their public statements and private remarks that neither Matak nor Lon Nol has been contemplating any radical departure from Sihanouk's policy, nor have they shown that they have any detailed plan of how they

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can get the Communists off Cambodian territory. This may be because the Vietnamese Communist issue has been, at least up to now, only a means toward achieving certain domestic ends, i.e., the ouster of Sihanouk.

12. Although both Matak and Lon Nol appreciate the difficult position Cambodia finds itself in, they are more inclined to take a tougher line with the Communists. There is considerable pressure in the army for more forceful measures against the Communists, probably even if that would involve direct cooperation with the US and South Vietnamese forces. Neither Sirik Matak nor Lon Nol is ideologically committed to neutrality and both men are capable of calling on the US for assistance if they think it necessary to protect Cambodia or their own positions. How far they are willing to push the Communists depends on a number of factors which neither they nor we can predict. In bringing the students into the streets of Phnom Penh on the pretext of the Vietnamese Communist issue, the new leaders have created a major domestic issue; now they are in the uncomfortable position of having to demonstrate some progress in meeting it. Having ousted Sihanouk on this issue--at least nominally--Matak and Lon Nol have to prove they can do better. If the Communists dig in their heels, if the talks that have been under way in Phnom Penh for the past few days break down, then the new leadership faces the difficult choice of either pursuing the matter militarily and risking a sharp and politically embarrassing setback, or doing, in essence, nothing. The statement by the acting chief of state on 18 March that Cambodia will continue to apply the "same policy" indicates that the new regime will seek a breathing spell before embarking on any new adventuristic policy. This also appears to be the message that was being conveyed to the US charge when he was told explicitly on 18 March that there would be no change in Cambodia's "policy of neutrality."

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North Vietnamese Reactions

13. The dilemma confronting the Vietnamese Communists is obvious. Life is inevitably going to be less easy for them in Cambodia than it was when Sihanouk was on hand to keep the anti-Vietnamese genie in the bottle, and they must consider there is a strong possibility that the new government in Phnom Penh will continue to make things more difficult. They almost certainly think that the supplies of arms they have been getting through Sihanoukville are in jeopardy, not to mention the rice they have been buying over and under the counter from the Cambodians. They may consider a serious confrontation with the Cambodian military somewhat less likely, but they certainly anticipate more frequent skirmishes with Cambodian troops. Finally, they must take into account the possibility that Phnom Penh will encourage or wink at cross-border incursions by the South Vietnamese or the US.

14. The Communists do not have many assets to deploy against this depressing array of possibilities. They will probably check with Sihanouk to see if he intends to attempt a return to Phnom Penh. If he does not they could use their unquestioned superiority over the Cambodian military to try to force further changes in Phnom Penh, but this is a dangerous card to play--one which could in fact add a long-term military effort in Cambodia to those already under way in Laos and South Vietnam. They could--and probably will--step up their aid to indigenous Cambodian insurgents in hopes of diverting some of the Cambodian Army's attention from the Communists' own activities.

15. We therefore suspect that the Communists will mute their public criticism of Sihanouk's successors, at least in the immediate future, and that in private they will be quite reasonable. They probably are hoping the Cambodians will preserve much of the form and a good deal of the substance of Sihanouk's neutralist policies, and that by appealing to the acquisitive instincts of many Cambodian leaders they can keep the essentials of

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their stake in the country: reasonably secure safe areas along the South Vietnamese border, a reasonably constant flow of arms and rice, and a minimum of Cambodian connivance in harassment from South Vietnam. If such a deal cannot be made and the Cambodians try to evict them, the North Vietnamese will be faced with the serious problem of how to quarter and support their main force units in the III and IV corps areas.

South Vietnamese Optimism

16. The South Vietnamese view of these developments is presumably exactly the reverse of the Communist view. Saigon undoubtedly welcomes the change in government leadership and the new pressures being applied against Communist use of Cambodian territory because these developments mean new problems, possibly critical ones, for South Vietnam's Communist enemy.

17. President Thieu presumably will be glad to do whatever he can discreetly do to assist the new regime as it tries to consolidate its position and deal with the Vietnamese Communists in Cambodia. He probably will not rush to embrace the new regime too openly, however, since this could embarrass it politically as it tries to persuade Hanoi to remove its troops.

18. The South Vietnamese probably expect at the least that local clashes between Cambodian forces and Vietnamese Communist units in Cambodia will increase in frequency and become a greater problem for the Communists. They probably also expect that the Cambodians, with Sihanouk gone, will be less obliging in providing discreet help in facilitating the movement of food, ammunition, and other supplies to the Communist enemy fighting in South Vietnam.

19. Assuming the present authorities in Phnom Penh can make their ouster of Sihanouk stick and that they are willing to follow through with their strong opposition to Communist use of Cambodian territory, Saigon officials can at least hope for some kind of coordinated efforts by Cambodian, South Vietnamese, and US forces to destroy the Communist sanctuary system in Cambodia. This could involve Cambodian

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permission for cross-border operations in force by South Vietnamese and/or US ground units.

20. The South Vietnamese probably calculate broadly that any such new pressures from Cambodia on Communist forces will be more effective the farther south these units are deployed. Enemy forces operating out of the triborder area opposite II Corps might be hindered somewhat, the enemy divisions in northern III Corps would be more seriously embarrassed by the loss of supplies and by military pressure from Cambodia, and the five-plus enemy regiments now operating along the periphery of IV Corps would be the most seriously exposed of all to Cambodian harassment or pressure.

The Soviet Reaction

21. The Soviets had been playing all the recent developments in Laos and Cambodia in low key, hoping that both crises could be papered over without their having to become too deeply involved. The way the Soviets initially handled the Cambodian leader's visit suggests that they did not see much purpose in being responsive to his requests to intercede with the North Vietnamese.

22. Further talks with Sihanouk, however, apparently caused Moscow to have second thoughts. It appears from the admittedly sketchy accounts of the additional sessions that Sihanouk had with the top leadership that Moscow was alarmed enough by developments to be more forthcoming.

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23. Moscow too was probably surprised and dismayed by the news from Phnom Penh. The Soviets have supported Sihanouk over the years because they recognized that he was one of the few Cambodian leaders

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willing to accommodate the North Vietnamese. Like Hanoi, the Soviets would probably prefer to see him restored to power. The Soviets realize, however, that much depends on the internal situation in Cambodia--a situation where their influence is practically nil.

24. Before Sihanouk left Moscow, the Soviet leaders probably assured him of their support if he does decide to challenge the National Assembly action. In practical terms what this means is promises of increased economic aid and certain kinds of political support. To this latter end, the Soviets may intervene with Hanoi in Sihanouk's behalf. They will probably ask the Vietnamese to give Sihanouk assurances of Cambodian "neutrality and territorial integrity." Although Hanoi is unlikely to reduce its troop presence substantially in Cambodia (and the Soviets are unlikely to ask the North Vietnamese to do so), Moscow might urge Hanoi to make some token troop withdrawals.

25. Should Sihanouk fail to return to power, Moscow will undoubtedly follow Hanoi's lead in its relations with Cambodia. In any event, Moscow may hope that the same political forces which compelled Sihanouk to seek Soviet support will eventually prompt his successors to do the same.

Consternation in Peking

26. Sihanouk now joins Nkrumah in a select company of foreign chiefs of state overthrown while on their way to Peking. The Chinese are withholding public comment on the ouster of Sihanouk, probably until they can get a reading from him as to his intentions. The Chinese are undoubtedly seriously concerned over the change of command in Phnom Penh and they will probably encourage Sihanouk to return to Cambodia in order to try to reassert his control over events in that country.

27. Although relations between the Chinese and Sihanouk have not been as warm in recent years as they once were, Peking would still prefer to deal with the Prince rather than with anti-Communist

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leaders such as Lon Nol or Sirik Matak. Peking's most immediate concern is over possible further moves by the new Cambodian leaders against the Vietnamese Communists. Peking's own supply line to the Vietnamese Communists through Sihanoukville must now look particularly vulnerable to the Chinese.

28. Peking seems to have been concerned that Hanoi might negotiate an end to the war ever since the Paris talks opened in May 1968 and, therefore, the Chinese are deeply concerned over any development which might further weaken Hanoi's willingness to keep the war going. Peking will be worried that consolidation of an actively anti-Communist regime in Phnom Penh would help to erode Hanoi's determination to continue fighting.

29. If Sihanouk is unable to reassert his authority in Cambodia, Peking can be expected to make a major effort with the new Phnom Penh leaders to work out a continuation of its supply program to the Vietnamese Communists and to arrange a solution to the problem of the presence of North Vietnamese troops on Cambodian territory. Should those efforts fail, Peking would probably publicly criticize the new Phnom Penh regime as a creature of the US and urge the Cambodian Communists to step up their activity against the government.

The Next Round

30. Where Cambodia and the Sirik Matak - Lon Nol government go from here obviously will depend heavily on what Sihanouk does. Press reports from Moscow claim that Sihanouk asserted that he was prepared to set up a government-in-exile, but if true this was clearly an emotional reaction on the part of the Prince. Never the most even-tempered of men, Sihanouk is going through a major crisis and he is likely to change his mind numerous times before he actually decides on a course of action.

31. There is little question that his visceral reaction is likely to be to return to Phnom Penh and settle the hash of the upstarts. If he takes this tack, however, it is not likely that Sirik

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Matak and Lon Nol will allow him to return. They have staked their futures on the move against Sihanouk and they are not likely to run unnecessary risks. A repentant Sihanouk returning to accept an honorific position and to lend his prestige to the nationalist struggle might be acceptable, but it seems doubtful that Sihanouk has the temperament for playing such a role. If Sihanouk manages to return to Cambodia, it would be a mistake to count him out, despite the fact that the deck is strongly stacked against him. He still commands considerable support among the people, and it is possible that there are elements in the armed forces that might rally to his banner. Sihanouk also knows where the skeletons are hidden, and revelations about some of the people who are now sanctimoniously portraying themselves as staunch Cambodian nationalists--Prime Minister Lon Nol, for example, has made enormous amounts of money trading with the Communists--could have a telling effect.

32. The move against Sihanouk has opened a Pandora's box. No one on the Cambodian scene at present can command the authority or legitimacy that Sihanouk enjoyed. By the force of his personality and wits, Sihanouk managed to keep the contending royal and personal factions in line. These same groups are now united in their opposition to Sihanouk and their desire to do something about the Vietnamese Communist threat, but how long they will stay together if things begin to get rough is another matter. The charges of corruption that they have leveled against Sihanouk's entourage are also, to varying degrees, applicable to many of them. They have no magic formula for meeting Cambodia's problems, nor do they have great experience in running the country. It may be that out of the adversity they are almost certain to go through, Sirik Matak, Lon Nol, or some other as yet unknown leader will get Cambodia out of the mess it has been in. But it is likely to be a dicey game, and Sihanouk may calculate that his best bet is to wait to pick up the fallen pieces.

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